

Something to believe



Florists share how they're prepping for a Christmas season like no other with the signature tenacity, creativity and flexibility that defines the industry.

we



SHUTTERSTOCK/MCSIKE

BY MARY WESTBROOK



Michael Trogdon, AAF, started 2020 feeling optimistic. “January and February were one of the strongest starts I’d seen in a long time,” said Trogdon, the owner of Burge Flower Shop in Asheboro, North Carolina, and a member of the Society of American Florists’ Retailers Council. Then, of course, came March and the onset of the pandemic. We don’t need to tell you what happened next: the confusion of shutdown orders; the disruptions in the industry’s supply chain; the worry, panic, fear, loneliness and grief that so many Americans experienced. Retail shops, design studios, wholesalers and flower farms shut down, some temporarily (and for the first time in their decades-long history); others permanently.

Then came the Spring holidays — Administrative Professionals Week, Easter, Passover and finally Mother’s Day — and with them a light: Florists who had muscled through March and found new ways to deliver products and services experienced some of their strongest returns; 70 percent of retailers responding to an SAF post-Mother’s Day survey said sales were up year over year. And despite the loss of prom season and graduations and the crater-sized hole left by event, wedding, sympathy and corporate work that’s been postponed, canceled or dramatically scaled back, the floral community persevered.

Moving into the end of the year, industry members who’ve been able to adapt so far feel hopeful. In SAF’s recent Economic Outlook Survey, two-thirds of respondents said they are either “extremely” or “very optimistic” that their business will make it through the pandemic — in part because the coming fall and winter holidays give the industry another chance to shine with consumers. (Read more about the survey on p. 38.) With all they’ve learned these past seven months, florists are ready to be the go-to gift provider for Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Christmas. “There is a good chance we can end the year on a good strong note,” Trogdon said. “I’m going to try my best to help make it happen.”

“Honestly, I’m excited for the holiday season,” said Brenda Sterk, the production, delivery and inventory control manager at Eastern Floral, which has three locations in and around Grand Rapids, Michigan. “2020 has brought us so many twists and turns and new hurdles to climb, but it has made us all stop and look at new ways to navigate our businesses. Some attempts have failed, but most have shown us that the floral business is resilient. Nothing is going to stop us from bringing the joy of flowers to others.”

This month, Floral Management editors reached out to florists across the country to hear about how they’ve adapted their holiday strategies to reach more customers, generate more sales and maximize the power of lean teams to leverage new opportunities, so that they can finish the year strong and set themselves up for the best possible start to 2021.

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—Brenda Sterk, Eastern Floral



Reimagine Your North Pole

In years past, retail florists might have kicked off the holiday season with a packed open house — the kind of all-hands-on-deck affair that would set the tone and cadence for the season among staff and get customers excited to decorate their homes and scoop up gifts for loved ones.

This year, that kind of in-person event is largely off the table, so florists have two choices: Scale back or go virtual. In North Carolina, Trogdon plans to move forward with his open house in mid-November, but he's extending the event by two days to limit crowds and he'll be serving prepackaged food items, curated from popular lines the shop already carries (e.g., Mississippi Cheese Straws and Oh Sugar! cookies). "We plan to make bags for customers to take with them," Trogdon said.

Justin DeGonia, AIFD, PFCI, said the team at New Leaf Flower & Plant Shop Inc. in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, will take a similar tack when updating its long-standing "Holiday Housewarming" party for current safety regulations. This year's open house will feature extended hours along with packaged refreshments (in lieu of their homemade buffet areas) and hand-sanitizing stations at the front door, staffed by an employee greeter who will keep tabs on crowd size. "Masks will be required, of course," DeGonia added. (SAF has tips and best practices on how to sanitize your shop at safnow.org/moreonline.)

Meanwhile, Kitty Eickhoff of Albany Country Floral & Gifts in Albany, Minnesota, said she'll do an invitation-only, in-person open house during evening hours this year for her top customers. (She plans to post holiday specials to her social media during the day for the general public.) "This year we have made a point of [selling] locally made and 'Made in America,' which is going to be our running theme for the holiday season," said Eickhoff.

However, she added, she's also hedging her bets by adding holiday

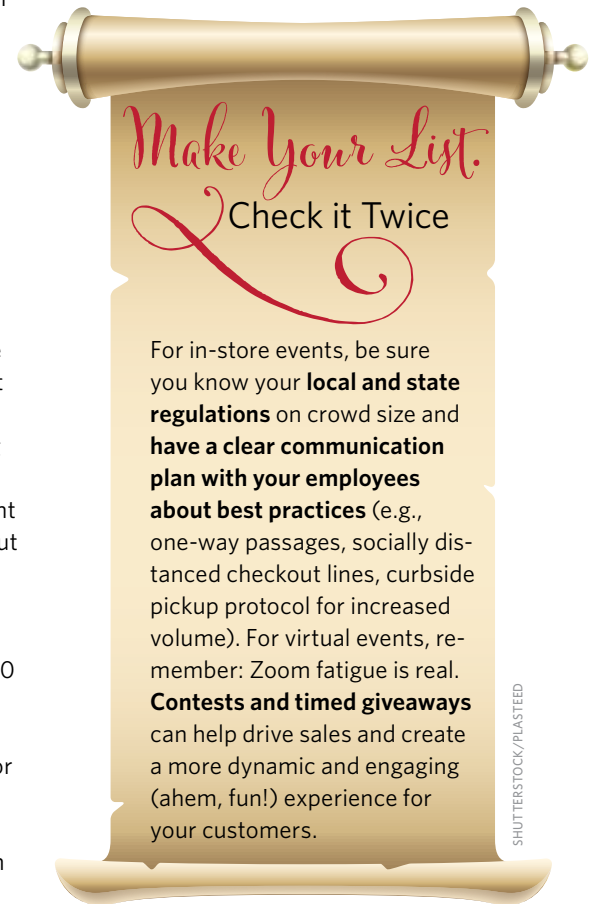
merchandise to her website and making plans to promote holiday specials throughout the season online and via social media. "If we are closed [for COVID reasons] and can't have our open house, we will have Plan B," she said. For instance, during the shutdown in the spring, the Albany Country team used its social media platforms to spotlight specials each day. "We went live and showed what was on the menu," Eickhoff said, adding that the exercise helped her identify new strengths among her employees, which she plans to use in the coming months. "I learned that I'm not so good at live videos, but I have an employee who is great: He's comfortable on camera and goes very off the cuff," she explained. "I set up the specials, he highlighted them and then we had a wonderful online sale. It worked for Easter and Spring; hopefully it will with Thanksgiving and Christmas."

Instead of mourning what they can't do — their annual three- to four-day affair with DIY ornament bars, hot chocolate stations and visits from Santa — the team at Eastern Floral is moving its event to the digital space. (They aren't alone in that decision: Eight in 10 florists surveyed by SAF said they will not host an in-person holiday open house this year.) They've loaded their site with more holiday gift merchandise (more on that strategy soon) and at press time were planning a series of Facebook Live events to encourage engagement and excitement among customers. "We're talking about making it [interactive], where the first two people to buy something on our Facebook Live feed will receive that item at 75 percent off, the next 10 at 50 percent off, the next 10 at 40 percent off. We'll keep that going until we sell the number of each item we want to for this event," Sterk explained. "It's a fun way for customers to stick with us for the live event. Hopefully, it keeps them interacting with us as well."



Kitty Eickhoff
Albany Country
Floral & Gifts
Albany, MN

Justin DeGonia, AIFD, PFCI
New Leaf Flower & Plant Shop
Poplar Bluff, MO



For in-store events, be sure you know your **local and state regulations** on crowd size and **have a clear communication plan with your employees about best practices** (e.g., one-way passages, socially distanced checkout lines, curbside pickup protocol for increased volume). For virtual events, remember: Zoom fatigue is real. **Contests and timed giveaways** can help drive sales and create a more dynamic and engaging (ahem, fun!) experience for your customers.

SHUTTERSTOCK/PLASTEED

Linked and Loaded

Florists are keeping the doors wide open for virtual workshops and classes. They've been a boon these past seven months for many members of the floral industry, especially retail florists and event designers, and offer an ideal way to connect with customers in the holiday season. In San Diego, Carma White of Four Seasons Flowers plans to run seasonal virtual workshops for Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, and she's using the approach not only to attract customers but also to keep them coming back. The Halloween workshop, for instance, centers on a sleek, modern design that incorporates a white pumpkin container from Teleflora. "It's not your traditional black and orange, spooky Halloween design, but then again, this isn't a traditional Halloween," she said. Customers who attend that event are encouraged to come back to the shop's online space for a Thanksgiving

session, which will reincorporate the same container, a move that streamlines costs and materials and taps into the reuse/reduce sensibility of White's customers.

Eastern Floral has resumed its in-person workshops at half capacity to allow for social distancing, but Sterk said they're also experimenting with virtual design classes. "We plan to give [participants] a link to a video and deliver all of the supplies ahead of time," she explained, adding at press time that the team was solidifying the branding behind the concept and double-checking costs to ensure profitability. (Read how other florists, including Helen Olivia Flowers in Alexandria, Virginia, have created virtual events, along with advice on how to choose a platform for your class and tips on tools and resources to feel more comfortable presenting in digital environments at safnow.org/moreonline.)

Make Your List. Check it Twice

Consider **marketing virtual workshops as experiences clients can share with local friends and loved ones and partner with other area businesses to offer wine/cheese and dessert packages** to your centerpiece and holiday wreath online classes. Give corporate customers an alternative to the Zoom holiday party with a **virtual team building exercise** in wreath making or at-home office décor, in lieu of the cubicle decorating contests of Before Times.

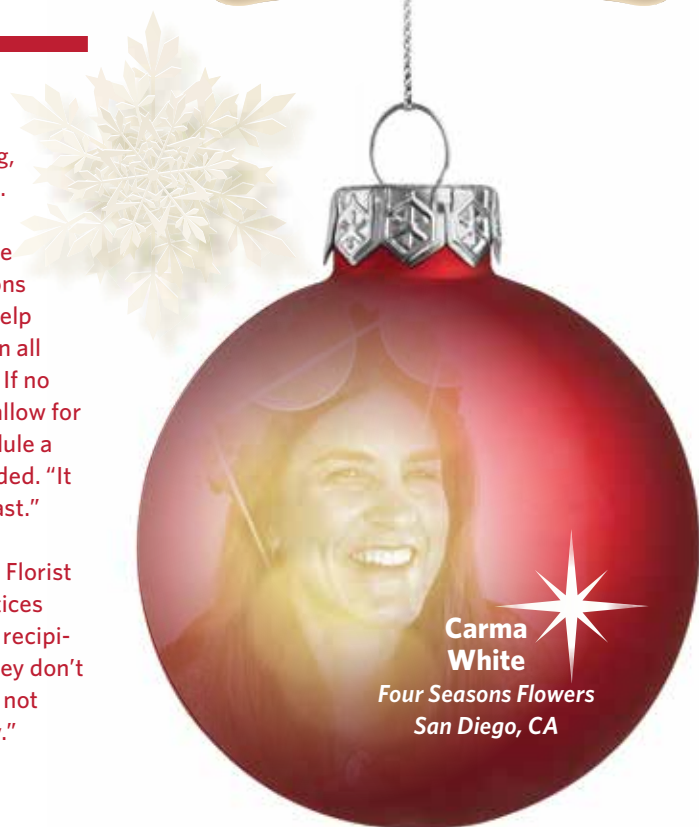
BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

Curbside pickup and contact-free delivery became staples for most retail florists during the pandemic — but with temps dropping, it's time to revisit how you're navigating these services, say florists.

"'Contact-free' does give us some challenges, especially in the state of Michigan," said Brenda Sterk of Eastern Floral, which has locations in and around Grand Rapids. "We will double-wrap everything to help insulate as best as we can. We require a recipient phone number on all orders." The Eastern team is trained to call recipients upon arrival. If no one answers, they knock on the door and then take a step back to allow for social distancing. Still no answer? They leave a message and schedule a redelivery. "This is always an issue in the colder months," Sterk added. "It will just be a little harder this year than it usually has been in the past."

Likewise, in Greenwich, Connecticut, James McArdle of McArdle's Florist and Garden Center said they generally plan to stick with best practices from years past. "Since the pandemic began, we have texted every recipient to see if they have any special delivery requests," he said. "If they don't respond to our text, and they are not home when we arrive, we will not leave a gift unattended. So, weather doesn't influence this strategy."

-M.W.



Load Up Your Website Like It's

Santa's Sleigh

According to SAF's recent Economic Outlook Survey, nearly 70 percent of retail florists have seen online sales increase during the pandemic — and for more than half of those respondents, the increases have been by as much as 20 percent. That's a trend that isn't going anywhere, and most florists Floral Management editors talked with in September said they are preparing for similarly brisk sales this holiday season in the digital space, adding new items, including giftware, that they might have sold only in-store in the past and updating their procedures and staff assignments to ensure a streamlined buying experience online.

"We already keep pretty current with our website, but we're now making changes weekly to accommodate product we have on hand, and what we need to push," said Sterk. Her team has added more of that gift merchandise and incorporated a new holiday tab for fresh floral designs, an approach they used pre-pandemic as well. "We try to add some good corporate, hostess and general gift ideas during the holidays, and we'll be including more locally sourced products this year to support our local small businesses that have suffered during this pandemic."

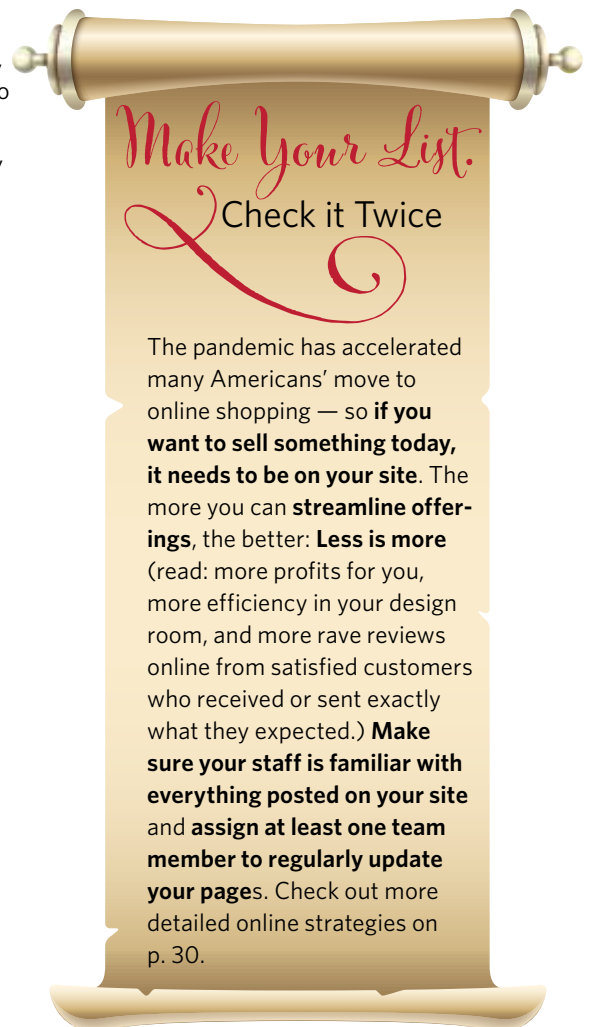
Ted Winston of Winston Flowers, which has six locations in Boston, New York, and Greenwich, Connecticut, said the business is taking a similar approach.

"We've expanded the offerings of our holiday collection this year to include pieces that can be used at home, in offices, or sent as gifts between friends or colleagues," he said, noting the business has seen a significant increase in online sales since May. The expanded products will be featured in Winston's holiday collection on the website. Winston's special services team will be available during business hours for any live design questions or to help guide customers through the selection process.

In SAF's survey, more than 42 percent of retailers said they've seen add-on sales increase this year, and Trogdon said he's paying special attention to that shift as he thinks through his online sales strategy for Christmas, ramping up those offerings to appeal to customers who are looking for a little something extra (balloons, chocolates, candles) to communicate across the miles. "Balloons are huge right now," said White, in San Diego. "Our balloon business has tripled." The interest in her community spiked in the spring, when parents were scrambling to fête graduates who were stuck with digital graduation ceremonies. "Before the pandemic, we never had a section for balloons or plush on our website, but now we do," said White, who's also added chocolate candies from a local chocolatier to her site.

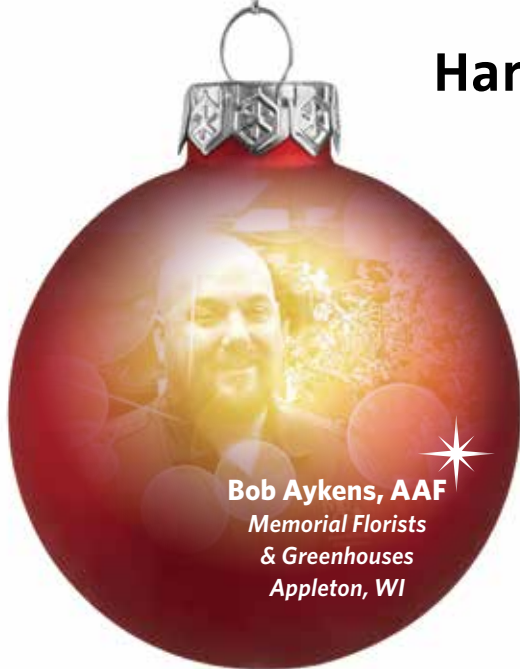
"In the last seven months, despite all the downfalls and changes, we have seen people order flowers that never have before. It really has been a time for us to shine and make a new generation understand the power of giving flowers. Now, we have to make those customers into repeat customers through our marketing channels."

—Bob Aykens, AAF, Memorial Florists & Greenhouses



The pandemic has accelerated many Americans' move to online shopping — so **if you want to sell something today, it needs to be on your site.** The more you can **streamline offerings**, the better: **Less is more** (read: more profits for you, more efficiency in your design room, and more rave reviews online from satisfied customers who received or sent exactly what they expected.) **Make sure your staff is familiar with everything posted on your site and assign at least one team member to regularly update your pages.** Check out more detailed online strategies on p. 30.

Harness Your Inner Oprah and Tout Your *Favorite Things*



Bob Aykens, AAF
Memorial Florists
& Greenhouses
Appleton, WI

Whatever you do this holiday season, make sure that, whether online, over the phone and in person, you push what you want to sell, say florists. Supply chain challenges still exist — at press time, some florists were noting difficulty sourcing some hard goods, plants and Christmas greens, in particular (see p. 48 for more). With the possibility of new shutdowns and flu season looming, giving yourself and your employees as much flexibility as possible to improvise and promote what’s in stock is key to your profitability — and your sanity.

“We need to be able to react and adapt quickly,” Sterk said, adding that her plan of attack includes taking products that are unavailable off the website quickly and training staff to sell what’s in the cooler, a best practice for years in the industry that has only become more important during COVID. “We are selling everything we have [in stock] and not buying crazy things for ‘that one order,’” Sterk explained. “We’ve also learned that our customers are not so much focused on the exact flower or the exact shade of color as they are with simply a beautiful design to tell their loved one that they are thinking about them and that they care.”

This year’s holiday season also presents opportunities to try ideas and novel concepts as you position yourself as the go-to gift provider and problem-solver for customers who want something special and customized, said Winston. “We’ve introduced more design-centered live content via social media, DIY kits, and custom occasion baskets and crates like our Back-to-School Crate for virtual learning,” he said.

For his part, Trogdon, in North Carolina, is using the holiday period to underscore the local roots of his business. “Customers are looking for smaller, locally owned businesses to support, and I think that’s a big opportunity,” he said. “We plan to let people

know that our poinsettias are North Carolina-grown plants and play up the fact that this is our seventieth year in business.”

Don’t forget about all the first-time buyers you attracted during the pandemic and how to turn them into loyal customers, added Bob Aykens, AAF, president of Memorial Florists & Greenhouses in Appleton, Wisconsin. “In the last seven months, despite all the downfalls and changes, we have seen people order flowers that never have before,” he said. “It really has been a time for us to shine and make a new generation understand the power of giving flowers. Now, we have to make those customers into repeat customers through our marketing channels.”

Sterk agreed, saying they are putting more energy into social media pushes and looking for ways to incorporate giftware into fresh designs, both for an unexpected “wow factor” among customers and to clear out merchandise they ordered back when in-store shopping was still a major part of their sales mix. “I think [the holidays] will be a great opportunity to market ourselves to a new generation and a different crowd than we typically do,” she said. “This could open the door to not only our regular year-to-year customer base, but also to a whole new client base as well.”

That’s also the thinking of James McArdle, in Greenwich, Connecticut. In late September, the team at McArdle’s Florist and Garden Center started sending flower arrangements valued at \$150 to every new resident. “We’ve had an influx of new homeowners from New York — 200 and counting — and this was a way to introduce ourselves,” ahead of the holidays, McArdle said, adding that he considers the costs for the effort marketing investments, with the approach offering more targeted returns than traditional ad options.

Make Your List. Check it Twice

Promo the products and services you want to sell and train staff in the approach, so that you are moving through existing inventory and keeping costs in line. Throughout the fall, **find ways to introduce or reintroduce yourself and your products and services to customers**, so that when they’re thinking Hanukkah, Christmas (or Valentine’s Day), you’re top of mind. Now is the time to **make the most of unique marketing opportunities, especially those that help shore up the value proposition of flowers and keep you in front of your core customers.**

Deck The Halls Like Never Before

Fewer Americans will be traveling for the holidays this year, and nearly all Americans are tired of being cooped up at home staring at the same renovation and refresh projects they started but didn't quite finish early in the pandemic. Those realities bode well for holiday decorating opportunities. At press time, a number of florists said they were closely watching Halloween trends to see if more customers turned to décor to help lighten the mood and soften the blow of canceled parties and trick-or-treating plans.

"I'm feeling pretty optimistic, really," Trogdon said. "This holiday season may be one where people do more to decorate their homes and give gifts to friends and family."

McArdle agreed. "Consumers will be home more this year for the holiday," he said. "Because of that, they will be decorating more. I also think there will be more holiday parties this year, although smaller in size, and more gift-giving."

Still, the loss of income from corporate parties, large events and church services looms, and florists say they're scrambling to come up with ideas to help fill the holes.

Decorating has typically been a significant part of DeGonia's holiday strategy, representing about 35 percent of the season's income. This year, he's worried that some homeowners might be hesitant to have his team come into their houses and that longtime corporate customers won't see the value in décor services, especially if the virus forces them to shut down again. So, he and the New Leaf team are rethinking their approach and planning to offer online home décor demos and decorating lessons.

"For those customers that would rather isolate at home, we will also be going live on social media several times before and throughout our Holiday Housewarming party," he said. "This will allow customers to see the product and be able to call in for curbside pickup," a contact-free strategy they, like so many florists, introduced, fine-tuned and then mastered during the spring and summer months. 🌿

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WHAT ABOUT THE ELVES?

Labor continues to be a challenge for industry businesses in all segments; many businesses are still operating with lean teams, and that raises new concerns moving into the fall. "Losing a seasoned member of our team for up to 14 days during a 45-day holiday period could be devastating," said James McArdle of McArdle's Florist and Garden Center in Greenwich, Connecticut.

To protect the business and prep for the expected holiday sales increase, McArdle has added more people across all departments, as a kind of insurance policy to ensure operations continue. "We've done this since the beginning of the pandemic and it has paid off," said McArdle, adding that he plans to devote an additional two workers to focus on web order fulfillment and email, text and chat support.

Of course, with many Americans struggling to find childcare, taking on more responsibilities at home, worried about in-person interactions or earning enough to get by on unemployment, even finding employees to add to your ranks is a tall order. "It is difficult to find quality candidates for employment," said Justin DeGonia, AIFD, PFCI, of New Leaf Flower & Plant Shop Inc. in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. "This year seems to be more challenging."

-M.W.

